



## KEY FACTS

# ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PART 1 OF THE DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CIVIL PROCEEDINGS ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021

YEAR THREE REVIEW

APRIL 2026

KEY FACTS

## WHAT IS THE DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CIVIL PROCEEDINGS ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 (THE ACT) AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

- The Act came into effect on 21 February 2022 and created a domestic abuse offence to criminalise a course of abusive behaviour including controlling or coercive behaviour.
- It introduced a range of aggravating factors to be considered when Judges pass sentence in cases of domestic abuse, with an enhanced sentence available for the domestic abuse offence. The minimum sentence could also be increased if there were children impacted by the domestic abuse.
- It also meant other offences, like an assault or criminal damage, could be aggravated where it involved domestic abuse.
- The Act allowed the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to share information with schools through 'Operation Encompass' so they could help children affected by domestic abuse.

## WHAT IS THE ANNUAL REVIEW AND WHY DOES CRIMINAL JUSTICE INSPECTION NORTHERN IRELAND (CJI) DO IT?

The Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice was asked by the Minister of Justice to independently review Part 1 of the Act. These statutory Reviews must be completed annually for at least seven years. The **first Review Report** was published in April 2024 and the **second** in April 2025.

This Year Three Review focused on children, including the use of the Act to protect children and to recognise the impact domestic abuse had on them.

### For this year's Review CJI Inspectors:

- reviewed 73 PSNI and 76 Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) domestic abuse case files, with help from Inspectors from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI);
- completed interviews and focus groups with the PSNI, the PPS, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS), the Department of Justice (DoJ), the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector; and
- analysed data, performance and training information and case outcomes.

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## WHAT DID INSPECTORS FIND DURING THE YEAR THREE REVIEW?

- Positive progress had been made in raising criminal justice system awareness about domestic abuse as a criminal offence.
- Criminal justice leaders had stayed committed to their goals, but putting plans into action in a stable and reliable way proved difficult.
- Training on how to deal with domestic abuse cases across the criminal justice system needs to get better. The quality and consistency of training had declined over time and was not meeting the requirements of the Act. Supervisors and managers need to make sure the Act is being used correctly by the people they lead.
- The voice of the child wasn't evident and use of the child aggravators was still a concern. Case file reviews showed that the identification and application of child aggravators had improved slightly, but it remained inconsistent, and in many cases where they should have been applied, they weren't.
- While there was some progress on improving Court records, accurate, complete and consistent details of when an offender's sentence was or was not enhanced due to Act aggravators, still required improvement.
- Outcomes for victims improved when the domestic abuse offence was identified and prosecuted. Inspectors found evidence of the domestic abuse offence not being proceeded with at Court, but other offences were with no explanation available about why it had been withdrawn.
- Police response times and risk recording was better than in the Year One Review.
- Many victims face difficulties reporting abuse or are unsure about support services. Victim experiences differ by gender and Section 75 groups. Poor referral processes, inconsistent police records and limited monitoring make it harder to access help and lead to under-reporting.
- Changes to the Home Office Counting Rules and the reliance on victim-based crime recording meant not all domestic abuse crimes were being captured in official statistics. This meant that the data collected and reported by the PSNI, the PPS and the NICTS was inconsistent and potentially misleading.



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## WHAT NEEDS TO BE BETTER?

Inspectors have made four recommendations for improvement, including:

### At a Strategic (leadership) level:

- The PSNI and the PPS need to review their training to ensure:
  - it meets the requirements of the Act,
  - staff have the skills needed to apply the full powers of the Act correctly; and
  - the DoJ analyses the effectiveness and quantity of training, while each criminal justice organisation needs to evaluate what impact their investment in training is having. It would be good if the DoJ not only reported what organisations told them but had an overview of the criminal justice system and what the collective impact of training meant for victims.
- The PSNI and PPS must work together to deliver a child-centred approach to investigations and prosecutions to ensure children's voices are really heard and represented as intended by the Act.

### At an Operational (on the ground) level:

- The PPS policy for prosecuting cases of domestic abuse should be amended to reflect the internal guidance on the use of out of Court disposals for domestic abuse offences in exceptional circumstances only and clear rationale for it must be recorded every time.
- The NICTS and the PPS need to ensure accurate, complete and consistent recording when domestic abuse aggravators are applied in every case and when they lead or do not lead to an enhanced sentence, so Court records clearly reflect when an aggravator has been proven and how it influenced sentencing.



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## WHAT DO INSPECTORS WANT TO SEE HAPPEN NOW?

The Act has been in operation for four years and needs to be used across the criminal justice system as the effective response to domestic abuse in our community it was intended to be. We want all the Review recommendations to be fully implemented and better use of the Act's powers by the PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and the DoJ to protect all victims, including children, bring abusers to justice and deter future abuse.

If you would like to know anything more about us or this inspection please get in touch with:

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